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Creativity and Aging

by Kathleen Mundell

Kathleen Mundell discusses the importance of creativity and creative engagement for older adults and their communities. She describes several projects sponsored by the Creative Aging Program of the Maine Arts Commission, which is one of 14 state arts agencies invited to participate in a national pilot program as part of the National Center for Creative Aging's Engage Initiative.

Creativity is hardly the exclusive province of youth. It can blossom at any age—and in fact it can bloom with more depth and richness in older adults because it is informed by their vast stores of knowledge and experience.

Gene Cohen, director,
George Washington University's Center
on Aging, Health & Humanities

Getting older doesn't have to be all bad news. Today, people are living longer than previous generations did, and for many, later life holds exciting opportunities for personal development and exploration. By shifting our focus from physical and mental decline to vitality and an expanded sense of self as we age, we open ourselves to the possibility of future years filled with growth, learning, and fulfillment.

Central to this viewpoint is recognition of how creativity affects the aging brain.

More than two decades ago, Dr. Gene Cohen, renowned geriatric psychiatrist and director of the Institute on Health, Humanities and Aging at George Washington University, suggested that creativity was like chocolate for the brain. His landmark research pointed to the positive impact of creativity on older adults' physical, mental, and emotional health. He coined the term creative aging to describe how creativity, in all its multifaceted forms, can not only sharpen cognitive skills but further the aging brain's ability to grow, change, and form new connections. (Cohen 2000).

But creative aging is not just about cultivating creativity. It's also about engagement. The term creative engagement refers to the benefits of participating in creative endeavors with others at both individual and

community levels. Such opportunities enable older adults to forge new connections and expand and strengthen their social networks while gaining a sense of personal value and meaning, all of which are keys to brain health (Dahlberg 2002). Anne Basting is founder and director of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Center Center on Age & Community and director of TimeSlips, a nationwide program that uses improvisational storytelling as an invention for people with dementia and other cognitive disabilities. She describes the benefits: "Creative Engagement opens a path to a stronger sense of self in community. It develops a sense of purpose, of legacy. It creates a sense of belongingness" (<http://www.utimes.pitt.edu/?p=21699>).

In 2014, as part of the National Center for Creative Aging's *Engage Initiative*, the Maine Arts Commission became one of 14 state arts agencies invited to participate



Photo by Sam James Levine

As part of the Beehive Collective's project, Norma Haynie, Whitneyville, is photographed holding an image of her first boyfriend.

in a national pilot program aimed at increasing the capacity of state and local arts organizations to improve the lives of older adults. As a result, the commission developed the Creative Aging Program. Aimed at fostering creative engagement, the program supports local projects that enhance older adults' quality of life and honors the vital role that elders can play in community life.

In designing the program, we looked to the research into how older adults learn. Particularly influential was the work of Malcolm Knowles, who contrasted the needs of adult learners with those of younger students. He found that older learners are more self-directed than their younger counterparts and are drawn to challenges that call for problem solving and hands-on engagement—a learning style that Knowles dubbed *andragogy*. Elders, he found, learn best in collaborative, process-oriented settings, as opposed to more traditional, didactic approaches centered on merely conveying content. They are especially motivated by topics and activities that are relevant to their life experiences (Knowles 1984).

In addition, the Creative Aging project is anchored in a set of principles put forth by Gay Hanna and Susan Perlstein (2008) of the National Center for Creative Aging. Following Hanna and Perlstein's precepts, the Commission sought to

- Follow adult learning principles by incorporating students' expertise and life stories.
- Develop programs sequentially with measurable outcomes, both to support evaluation and to increase learners' sense of meaning and purpose.
- Emphasize mastery and skill-building.
- Engage professional artists to lead program development and implementation.
- Build sustainable partnerships across sectors and agencies to promote public awareness.

Thus informed, the commission developed resources aimed at promoting the development of creative-aging programs at the local level. Among the most successful of these resources are the Creative Aging Teacher Artist Roster and the Community Partnership Program.

- Teaching Artist Roster—a free, online resource for nonprofit organizations interested in developing creative-aging programs. Featuring teacher artists interested in working with older adults

in community settings from libraries to senior centers, the roster covers a range of artistic disciplines, including dance, visual arts, theater, and poetry. Participating artists receive training from the commission in best practices in creative aging, program design and implementation, and the development of effective teaching plans. To date, the commission has provided free training for teaching artists by nationally known programs including TimeSlips and Lifetime Arts. Both of these opportunities were positively regarded by participants and have laid an excellent foundation for a strong program in Maine.

- Community Partnership Program—a fund for nonprofit organizations seeking to develop participatory programs involving artists from the Teaching Artist Roster. Successful projects incorporate creative-aging principles of social engagement and creativity, as well as a public component that promotes intergenerational exchange while honoring older community members.

Throughout the Creative Aging Program's first year, these resources helped foster a variety of local programs in which painters, dancers, storytellers, and bookmakers teach six- to eight-week workshops at local libraries, senior centers, and assisted living centers. Following are several success stories from year one.

Imagine how much stronger communities will be when they choose to benefit from the time and talents of their most experienced citizens.

Stacey Easterling, Program Executive
for Aging, Atlantic Philanthropies

THE BEEHIVE DESIGN COLLECTIVE: STORY GATHERING

As part of the pilot for the Creative Aging Program, the Beehive Design Collective, an all-volunteer, art-activists collective based in Machias, Maine, spent the summer of 2014 interviewing town elders and recording their stories. The project coincided with the collective's restoration of several downtown historic buildings. As project director Hillary Savage explained:

We took a moment to gather stories about the buildings' previous lives and what they meant

to the town. The relationship of the buildings is important, not only in proximity (as they stood right across the street from each other) but also in memory, as the 5&10 was where most people hung out and bought candy before going over to the theater to watch the show. Many of the folks we interviewed either worked there, or their family members did, and all had very vivid memories to share about the spaces. We heard many different versions of a similar story: what downtown Machias used to be, how it has changed, and hopes for the future.

The story-gathering project exceeded expectations. By highlighting and preserving elders' stories, it not only yielded memories that will be used to inform decisions as to the future of the town's historic structures, but also sparked connections between generations, heightened townspeople's sense of place, and served as an overt acknowledgment of the importance of elders as keepers of local culture. As Savage commented, "This process was a way to gain insight into and honor the past as well as use that memory to inform decisions about the next stage of the buildings' life. The project grew beyond what we initially anticipated and we are now looking to see how we can further honor these stories and share them with generations to come."

TRADITIONAL ARTS APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAM

As we age, sharing our stories helps us to affirm who we are and achieve personal integration, an essential step in the passing on of one's legacy (Haight and Haight 2007).

Being cast in this generative role is one of the gifts of growing older. It allows us to contribute the wisdom we've gained through experience and at the same time asks us to step into the role of teacher—a process that often gives our lives a renewed sense of purpose (McAdams and de St. Aubin 1992).

The Maine Arts Commission's Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program, funded by the National Endowment for the Arts and now in its 25th year, demonstrates one way to put community elders' cultural knowledge to good use. In this initiative, elder masters of traditional arts teach their skills one-on-one to younger apprentices and, in the process, affirm their

central role as sources of wisdom and cultural knowledge within their communities.

As master Passamaquoddy basket maker Molly Neptune Parker describes it:

Basket making to me is about our respect for using the bounty of nature and the talent of generations in making something of value, beauty, and function. The art of Passamaquoddy basket making has been woven throughout all aspects of my life. I have used it to teach myself, my children, my grandchildren, and others about Passamaquoddy traditions, history, values and language.

Also involved in the apprenticeship program is master woodcarver Tom Cote. Cote comes from a long line of talented woodcarvers, stretching as far back as his great-great-grandfather Jean Baptiste Cote of Quebec, a carver of church altars. Tom said carving reminds him of growing up in Maine's St. John Valley, surrounded by a vibrant Franco population that traces its roots to Acadia and Quebec.

Now teaching a new generation of woodcarvers, including his granddaughter, Cote reflected on the lessons he offers in his studio in Limestone, Maine:

I want to teach my apprentices that carvers have a tradition of dealing with the shaping of dull, common, and ordinary things into objects of interest and value, using local raw materials to enrich the lives of family and friends. This is an important part of the Acadian tradition.



Photo by Peter Dembski

Master Passamaquoddy basketmaker Molly Neptune Parker with her grandson, George Neptune.



Photo by Peter Dembski

Master Acadian woodcarver Tom Cote with his two apprentices, Ellyzabeth Bencivenga (middle) and Jessica Stackhouse (right).

LIVING ART-LIVING WELL STUDIO

Several of the master artists involved in the apprenticeship program also feature prominently in the work of the Living Art-Living Well Studio of the University of New England Geriatric Education Program. The organization offers professional-development seminars for health care professionals in hospitals and assisted living centers, in which master traditional artists are presented as role models of healthy aging. The goal is to show health care providers how overall well-being improves when caregivers take a person-centered approach, getting to know their patients, not just as bundles of symptoms or diagnoses, but as whole human beings with unique abilities and experiences.

The greatest thing about getting older is getting to walk into the deeper part of the pool.

Ethan Hawke, actor

LOOKING AHEAD: THE FUTURE OF CREATIVE AGING IN MAINE

Between the aging of longstanding residents and a boom in retirees attracted to Maine's vaunted quality of life and arts-rich environment, the state now has one of the oldest populations in the nation. While innovative initiatives such as the Creative Aging Program have made impressive strides, there remains much to be done to address the needs of the state's

elders. An emphasis on creative endeavor—on helping people reach within themselves to find meaning and connection—will remain central as we move toward an inspired, and inspiring, future for all Maine people as they adapt to the challenges of later life. 🐟

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Kathleen Mundell is the director of the Creative Aging and Traditional Arts Programs at the Maine Arts Commission. Since 2010, she has worked with University of New England's Geriatric Education Center's training program for health care professionals on presenting

master elder artists from the Maine Arts Commission's Traditional Arts Apprenticeship program as role models for healthy aging.